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A REVIVALIST OF SIX CENTURIES AGO.

BY G. G. COULTON.

THERE is a charming essay on Religious Revivals in Mediæval Italy among the collected papers of the late J. A. Symonds. He describes in the first place the "Great Alleluia" of 1233, and the marvellous career of John of Vicenza, under whose influence north Italy seemed for a few weeks to have no business but prayer and praise and religious processions. John and his companion friars healed for a time the most inveterate feuds: city after city surrendered to them at discretion, and allowed its statutes to be made or unmade by these wandering preachers. Vivid as is Symonds's description of the Revival, he yet leaves some of the most curious details ungleaned. The Statutes of Parma, for instance, show us the friars cleansing that great cathedral of the corn which, to the scandal of the more devout, was habitually stored in its nave—just as, in the year after Dante's great vision, a Devonshire parson was found using his church as granary and brew-house combined. Again, the Franciscan Salimbene gives us many curious details of the Great Alleluia, which probably determined his own conversion. Sincere believer as he is, he nevertheless describes with great gusto the ingenious bogus miracles which his great friend Brother Gerard of Modena used to concoct in conjunction with John of Vicenza; and he assures us that many were converted by this means. He also describes how Brother John's head was turned by his success. When the great preacher was shaved during a visit to a Franciscan convent he was naïvely disappointed (it appears) that the Brethren did not pounce on the shavings for relics. Such little touches go to explain John's final fall. He demanded to be created Duke and Count of Vicenza, and used his sudden power so recklessly that he was cast into prison, from which he emerged a discredited and

neglected man. For the Great Alleluia had died away as rapidly as it rose; and within a few months family feuds and civil wars were raging worse than before.

Symonds describes other similar revivals in mediæval Italy—half sincere, half theatrical, but always fierce and short-lived. I propose here to speak of a very different mission-preacher of the same age, the greatest perhaps of all the Middle Ages, the German Berthold of Ratisbon. He, too, produced effects difficult to be imagined in these days of widely diffused education; but in him there was no touch of quackery, and his influence outlasted that of his Italian colleagues. The linden under which he preached at Glatz was still famous in the seventeenth century; and his sermons, printed in modern German as a book of living theology, are in their third edition.* Born in 1220 of an upper-class burgher family at Ratisbon, Berthold joined the Franciscans while still a youth, and was the favorite pupil of David of Augsburg, whose writings have often been attributed to St. Bonaventura. In 1250 he was already a famous preacher; until his death in 1272 he tramped from town to town, from village to village, like a Wesley or a Whitefield of later days. In this fashion he traversed Bavaria, the Rhineland, Switzerland, Swabia, Austria proper, Moravia, Bohemia, Silesia, Thuringia and Franconia. His fame was great even in Italy, and is enshrined in the early Franciscan chronicles. At this moment, especially, it may well interest a modern reader to get a glimpse of mediæval mission-preaching.

Of the effect of these sermons we have very marvellous stories, even when due allowance has been made for mediæval exaggeration. The best description of him, as we might expect, is to be found in the autobiography of his contemporary Salimbene, who always gives life to whatever he touches:

"All who have heard him say that, from the days of the Apostles even to our own, there was never his like in the German tongue. He was followed by a great multitude of men and women, sometimes to the number of sixty or a hundred thousand; or, again, the whole populations of more than one city would come together to hear the honeyed and saving words which flowed from his lips. He was wont to ascend a wooden belfry, which he used as a pulpit in country places: and they who set up the structure crowned it with a pennon, that folk might

* Regensburg, Mainz, 1873.

see whether the wind blew, and so seat themselves as to hear most clearly. And, wonderful to relate! he was heard and understood as well by the most distant as by those who sat by his side; nor did any rise to depart until he had made an end of his preaching. And when he preached of the tremendous Judgment of God, all would tremble as a rush quivers in the water; and they would beseech him for God's love to speak no more of that matter; for it grieved them beyond endurance to hear him. One day, when he was to preach in a certain place, a ploughman besought his master for God's sake to let him go and hear the sermon; but his lord answered, 'I myself shall go, but thou shalt go plough in the field with the oxen.' So, when the ploughman had set himself to plough in the field at dawn, straightway by a miracle he heard the voice of Brother Berthold preaching, though he was thirty miles distant; and forthwith he unyoked his oxen and let them feed, and sat down to listen to the sermon. And when the sermon was done he ploughed as much as he was wont to plough with a full day's work."

A precious fragment printed in the appendix to the first volume of the "*Analecta Franciscana*" reports a conversation of Berthold with St. Louis and with the King of Navarre. The latter questioned the great preacher about this reported miracle of the ploughman, and Berthold replied:

"Good my lord, believe it not, and give no faith to tales of this kind which men tell of me as though they were miracles. . . . There are certain men who, either for lucre's sake, or for some other vain cause, follow me among the rest of the multitude, and at times invent such tales and tell them to others."

Yet the real wonders he worked led inevitably to such reports. A noble lady had "followed him for six whole years from town to village, with other women that were of her company, yet could never get speech of him in private." At last, when all her money was spent, she was able to see him and tell him of her distress. He sent her to a banker in the town, who would give her (he said) "the money value of one single day of that indulgence for which she had followed Brother Berthold these six years." The banker, contemptuously humoring her fancy, was astonished to find that all his gold was as a mere feather in one scale so long as the lady breathed into the other; "for the Holy Ghost lent such weight to her breath that no weight of coin could balance that scale." He was converted, as was also a robber-knight so notorious that the burghers of the nearest city had adorned their council-hall with a fresco representing him by anticipation on the gallows.

Berthold, like all mission-preachers, especially in the Middle Ages, appealed most constantly to the simple themes of Heaven and Hell. According to an often-repeated legend, a woman was so overcome by his terrible invectives against her own besetting sin that she gave up the ghost in the middle of his sermon; but his prayers recalled her to life for just long enough to make her confession and her final peace with God. She told the horror-stricken congregation that, out of 50,000 souls which had departed at the same moment with herself, three only had been worthy even of Purgatory, and one of Heaven; the remaining 49,996 having gone straight down to hell! Something of this vivid imagination may be found in Berthold's sermons even after six hundred years. We see him addressing his vast congregations in the open air. At one moment, speaking of the glory of Transubstantiation, he says:

"Grant now that our dear Lady St. Mary, Mother of God, stood here on this fair meadow, while all the Saints and all the Angels found room around her, and that I were found worthy to see this sight. . . . I would rather turn and bow the knee before a priest bearing the Lord's body to the sick, than before our Lady St. Mary and all the Saints of the whole host of heaven."

Again, he answers an objection from his hearers:

"Brother Berthold, thou speakest oft and oft of these devils and all their sleights; yet we never see or hear or touch or feel a single devil."

"Lo, now that is even the worst harm they can do thee: for, hadst thou but once seen a single devil in his true form, I should know for certain that thou wouldest never sin more. . . . If the devil came out at this moment from this forest hard by, and this city that we see before us were a burning fiery furnace heated through and through, then should ye see such a press of folk as never was seen, and never shall be seen in this world, and all thronging headlong into that burning fiery furnace!"

Berthold's sermons give a gloomy view of society even during the years between St. Francis's death and Dante's boyhood. The Pope could make and unmake emperors; Cardinals and Bishops were among the greatest princes of the day; the parish priest had inquisitorial and disciplinary rights over almost every act of his parishioners, yet the people were not only far more ignorant, but had even less of true religion than to-day. "The laity are evil, the religious are evil," is a quotation constantly recurring in Berthold's sermons. He finds himself compelled to advise his

hearers on delicate points of spiritual relationship arising from the numbers of "parson's children" which were to be found everywhere. "It often happens," he continues, "that a Bishop has children, few or many"; yet for 200 years clerical celibacy had been the strict rule of the Church. He complains that bribery and corruption are as rampant in the spiritual as in the lay courts. In consequence of the depredations of robber-nobles, "in places where there might well be two or three parish priests, there is scarce one; and even he may well be found unlearned." The pagan superstition still flourished which held it an evil omen to meet a priest the first thing in the morning. Berthold alludes to the constant tithe-quarrels; as an English bishop of the same date complains that parishioners, indignant that priests should exact tithes even of milk, revenged themselves by bringing their pailful to church and pouring it on the floor before the altar. The priest himself, again, was often excommunicate, and the whole parish involved with him in mortal sin. Nor, with all his nominal authority, could the parson put down the constant habit of Sunday work, or secure regular attendance at church. "Lo, a stinking goat of a Jew has more reverence for his holy days than thou!" The people's religious education also left much to be desired. "Many rise in the morning without even making the sign of the cross, and very likely reach the age of twenty years without being able to repeat the Lord's Prayer." Many, again, are so ignorant of the creed that they fall a prey to the first doubt suggested by the experience of life: "Ah, God! who, then, are in the right—Jews, heathens, or heretics? I know not how things stand, nor who hath the right faith." Of Bible study in the modern sense there was of course no question, nor would it have been permitted even if it had been otherwise possible. The laity are therefore warned against disputing with Jews: "For ye are unlearned, while they are learned in the Scriptures, and they have pondered carefully how they may persuade you; so that ye will be ever the weaker in faith for that dispute." As St. Louis pleaded in the same century, a layman's only valid argument in such cases was "to thrust his sword into the Jew's belly as far as it would go."

But had not the parish clergy strong auxiliaries in the swarms of friars who filled the land? The best influence of the friars was fast waning during Berthold's lifetime, though these new

Orders were scarcely half a century old. Too often the friar and the parish priest were at daggers drawn; or heretics carried on their propaganda in the name of St. Francis, just as the first Franciscan missionaries had been taken for wandering heretics. Berthold's constant and impassioned warnings show clearly (if we did not know it from other sources) how little the Roman faith could claim to reign unquestioned even during this its golden age. He reckons the heretical sects of his time at "a good hundred and fifty," and appeals to his hearers' knowledge of "how many thousand men are led astray by unfaith." The process of perversion, as he describes it, is simple. A heretic is never converted; his heart is turned to stone; "and just as crystal is petrified water, so are heretics petrified Christians: as little, therefore, as the crystal can ever be turned to water again, so little can a heretic be turned back to Christianity, however fresh and green he may be in his heresy."* On the other hand, it is only too easy to make a Catholic into a heretic. The preacher illustrates this through one of his most picturesque, and least accurate, illustrations from natural history. Playing upon the German names for *heretic* and *cat* (*Ketzer, Katze*), he says:

"No household beast can work so great harm in so short a time as this, more especially in summer: let all take good heed of the cat. She goes away and licks a toad, under some hedge or wheresoever she may find it, until the toad begins to bleed; then the poison makes her thirsty, and she comes and drinks at the same water whereat men drink, and defiles it, so that many a man is sick for half a year, or a whole year long, or even to his life's end; or it may be that he takes his sudden death therefrom. Or again the cat drinks so greedily that a drop falls from her eye into the water, or that she sneezes therein: and he who uses that water must taste of bitter death. . . . Wherefore, ye folk, drive her away, for the breath that cometh from her throat is most unsound and perilous: let her be driven forth from the kitchen or from wheresoever ye may be, for she is deadly unclean. And thence also hath the heretic his name of *Ketzer*, since in all his ways he is like no beast so much as a cat. He goes as demurely (*geistlich*) to other folk, and speaks as sweetly and can bear himself as softly as any cat; and even so suddenly has he defiled men's bodies. He holds so sweet speech of God and the angels, that thou wouldest swear a thousand oaths that he is an angel himself; yet he is the devil incarnate. And he promises to let thee see an angel, and teach thee to see God with thy bodily eyes:

* The contemporary Dominican preacher, Etienne de Bourbon, complains also that heretics too often know their Bible far better than Catholics, and that, while many are perverted from the faith, practically none are ever reconverted. He explains it ingeniously: wine often turns to vinegar, but never vinegar to wine.

yet he hath swiftly parted thee from thy Christian faith, and thou art lost for evermore. . . . Had I a sister in a country wherein were only one heretic, yet that one heretic would keep me in fear for her, so noisome is he. Therefore let all folk take heed of him. I myself, by God's grace, am as fast rooted in the Christian faith as any Christian man should rightly be; yet, rather than dwell knowingly one brief fortnight in the same house with a heretic, I would dwell a whole year with five hundred devils! What, heretic! art thou by chance in this congregation? I pray to Almighty God that there be none here present!"

These sermons explain, almost more plainly than any other document, the state of mind which drove honest and good Catholics into such wholesale and systematic barbarities as we can scarcely think of without a shudder. If, even in the Age of Faith *par excellence*, faith was so frail as to be shattered by the least breath, and heresy so strong as to resist all orthodox arguments, then persecution was plainly the only resource of men who denied to the heretic the name of Christian, and looked upon him and his as mere food for hell-fire. Nor does Berthold show us only heresy rampant; he constantly alludes to free thought also. But for the stern repression of the Jews, he thinks that they might have succeeded in smothering Christianity altogether. Again, men found it hard to understand why Cato should be in hell with Nero: a point which may explain Dante's promotion of the former to Purgatory. Again:

"Many say, 'the man who is used to hell is more at his ease there than anywhere else.' That is a great lie; for man can never be used to hell. . . . Some also say—I have heard it even from learned folk—that our Lord makes for many a man some mansion and comfort in hell, that no pain may torment him. That again is a lie and a heresy. . . . Many again preach openly that, whether a man do well or ill, he will be saved if he be destined to salvation; and, however well he do all through the world, he must go to hell if hell be appointed for him."

This, of course, is the predestinarian fatalism which many modern writers imagine Calvin to have invented, though Joinville and Salimbene show us how common it was among the sceptical upper classes in the thirteenth century in France and Italy. But the most popular arguments of mediæval sceptics were drawn from the lives of the clergy:

"Men say . . . 'we see none that work such evil as the parsons, nor that do such injustice, as may be seen daily: pay no heed therefore to what the parsons tell thee.' This is the root of almost all unbelief and heresy."

This brings us back again to the body of nominal believers: yet even here the picture is no brighter. The system of Indulgences was comparatively new, and far as yet from that colossal pardon traffic which shocked Luther; yet even Luther scarcely spoke more strongly than Berthold:

"Fie, penny-preacher, murderer of mankind! . . . Thou promisest so much pardon for a single penny or halfpenny that many thousands trust thee and dream they have atoned for all their sins with the penny or halfpenny, as thou protest to them. So they will never repent, but go hence to hell and are lost forever. . . . Thou hast murdered true penitence amongst us!"

Almost equally fatal was the trust in pilgrimages. Many deliberately ran up a long bill of sins in accordance with the devil's suggestion: "put off (repentance) until thou hast gained and laid up money; and then do penance bravely with a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, or a Lententide in Rome, or a journey to Compostella." Moreover, the pilgrim's extravagance often reduces wife and child to poverty; while he himself "gorges himself so that he comes back far fatter than he went, and has long tales of all that he saw, which he dins into men's ears during service and sermon-time." For the custom which made "Paul's Walk" into a sort of Piccadilly for our Stuart ancestors was simply the survival of a mediæval abuse. St. Bernardino's sermons show us the churches filled with folk who came in and went out when they liked, and scarcely suspended talk and laughter to doff their hoods for a moment at the elevation of the Host. Berthold returns again and again to such irreverences:

"Men talk nowadays in church as if they were at market, calling across to each other and boasting and telling what each has seen in foreign lands; so that one man may easily trouble six or ten who would gladly be silent. . . . And ye women! ye never let your mouths rest from unprofitable babble. One complains to another of her maid-servant, how greedy she is of sleep and how loth to work; another tells of her husband; a third of her children, how this one is a weariness, and that other thriveth not. To what devil art thou complaining thus in church?"

The churchyard was used for fairs and markets, with all their attendant disorders, and for indecent pagan dances that were practised now on Christian festivals; it deserved no longer its old German name of "*Friedhof*," or Court of Peace. Nor were these dances the most painful relics of paganism. The mass

itself had become a mere pagan incantation, to all practical purposes, for the majority of the laity. Berthold is preaching reverence for the Mass, and one of the congregation expostulates with him :

“ But, Brother Berthold, we understand not the Mass, and cannot pray thereat so well as we should, nor feel so great reverence as if we understood it. We understand every word of the sermon, but the Mass we understand not, nor know what is being read or sung; we cannot comprehend it.”

The preacher therefore spends the rest of his sermon in giving a rough explanation of the service. No wonder that the holy wafer, the holy oils, the holy water in the font, needed to be kept under lock and key from the common people, who used them as engines of sorcery :

“ Many of the village folk would come to heaven, were it not for their witchcrafts. . . . The woman has spells for getting a husband, spells for her marriage; spells on this side and on that; spells before the child is born, before the christening, after the christening; and all she gains with her spells is that her child fares the worse all its life long. . . . Ye men, it is much marvel that ye lose not your wits for the monstrous witchcrafts that women practise on you!”

Like all mediæval moralists, he is never weary of gibing at women’s dress :

“ They take a bit of cloth, and twitch it hither and twitch it thither; they gild it here and there with gold thread, and spend thereon all their time and trouble . . . they will spend a good six months’ work on a single veil, which is sinful great travail. . . . They itch for praise, and to hear men say ‘ Lord! how fair! was ever aught so fair?’ Yet our Lady was far fairer than thou, but humble withal; so was St. Margaret, and many saints more.”

“ But, Brother Berthold, we do it for the goodman’s sake, that he may gaze the less on other women.”

To which Berthold answers with the pitiless logic of a man and a bachelor. If the goodman be honest, he will care more for your chaste conversation than for your outward adornment; if he be wanton, all your “ crimple-crispings ” and “ christy-crosties ” and gold thread will not avail to fix his wandering eyes. Encouraged by these words of sober reason, a man’s voice is raised amid the congregation :

“ Alas! Brother Berthold, . . . I have ofttimes besought my wife, first kindly and then sternly; but she would never leave her follies. I

fear to tear one gewgaw from her lest she go and buy another twice as dear, and my last loss be worse than the first."

The friar's answer, ungallant as it sounds to modern ears, is the true voice of the thirteenth century, from the king to the beggar, from the moralist to the poet or romancer:

"Come, man, take heart of grace; art thou not a man, and hast not a sword by thy side? Wilt thou be lightly overcome by a distaff? Pluck up thy courage, take heart, and tear it from her head, even though thou tear away a hair or twain therewithal; and cast all together into the fire! Do thus not thrice or four times only; then will she leave her follies. Man should be woman's lord and master."

Berthold has his own definite ideas, too, about children. Why is there such mortality among rich folk's children in especial?

"Because the baby's sister makes him a mess of pap, and coaxes it into him. Now his little belly is soon filled, and the pap begins to bubble out; but she coaxes it in and in. Then comes his aunt, and does the same. Then comes his nurse, and cries, 'Alas, my child has eaten naught this day!' and sets herself to coax the pap in again, as before. Meanwhile the child whimpers and tosses its little limbs."

Don't you know (asks Berthold in another place) how your bodies are made? The stomach hangs in the middle, for all the world like a great caldron; and next it lies the liver, by whose heat the pot is kept boiling. If you fill it too full, what can it do but boil over?—hence come heartburn, fevers, dropsy, and all the ills that flesh is heir to.

An article like this can give only a slight idea of the wealth which Berthold offers to students of the past. There are few works equally accessible and equally rich in hints for the student of manners. The great Revivalist will not teach us pharisaical content with our own civilization; but he may well cure us of impotent hankerings after a dead past.

G. G. COULTON.